

Pixar's *Soul* explores big ideas about creativity, purpose, and the meaning of life

But the movie would be stronger if it skipped the metaphysical realm and just stayed put in Queens.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [January 27, 2021](#) issue



THE GREAT BEFORE: The new Pixar film, *Soul*, abandons the vivid Queens neighborhood of jazz pianist Joe Gardner (right), to tell much of the story from a washed-out world of disembodied soul blobs—like Soul 22 (left)—awaiting bodily assignment. (Disney+ / Pixar)

Pixar's new movie *Soul* follows an aspiring jazz pianist named Joe Gardner (voiced by Jamie Foxx). He spends his days teaching band in an underfunded Queens middle school, but he longs to make something more of his art. The same day he lands a life-changing gig, he has a terrible accident. His soul is separated from his body and transformed before our eyes into an aqua-blue blob on his way to the Great Beyond. Unwilling to accept this fate, he sets off to find a way back to earth.

Using this premise, *Soul* explores big ideas about creativity, purpose, and the meaning of life. In the end, however, the movie is hampered by the fact that much of its story is set in a disembodied metaphysical landscape. While *Soul* follows in the animated metaphysical tradition of *Inside Out* and *Coco*, it doesn't manage to vivify its otherworldly world in the same way.

Instead of the Great Beyond, Joe finds himself in the Great Before, a metaphysical state where new souls await human bodies. There he is mistaken for a mentor and paired up with Soul 22 (voiced by Tina Fey), an incorrigible soul who doesn't want to be born just as much as Joe doesn't want to die. Because she can't find her "spark," she can't take the final step to be born, and she is constantly badgered by new mentors to complete her journey when all she wants is to be left alone to sulk forever in a haze of anomie. They make a deal: Joe will help 22 find her spark, and in exchange she will give him her activated earth badge. He'll go back to his life, and she'll linger forever in the Great Before. Hijinks ensue, and they find themselves on earth.

As interested as I am in metaphysics, it was an exhilarating relief when we left the washed-out pastel world of the Great Before and landed back in the vibrant earthly reality of Joe's neighborhood in Queens. Soul 22 seems to agree. She is taken by the taste of pizza, the sound of music, and the play of light in the trees. Joe, in turn, sees life anew by watching from 22's perspective. As 22 interacts with the world, she recognizes that life is a more complicated mix of accident and purpose than she had believed. Joe recognizes that his single-minded pursuit of music has blinded him to the life around him.

Both Joe and 22 interpret the spark that 22 is missing as the unique creative purpose that all humans are supposed to have. Like an overscheduled kid shuffled from one activity to the next, 22 has spent countless years trying to find her passion to no avail, and she assumes this makes her unfit for living. This is also, to a degree, how Joe interprets his life: he won't accept an untimely death because he has not achieved the level of artistic success that he thinks is life's meaning. Their journey together is to recognize that the spark is simply a willingness to embrace life as a gift, not to win life like a talent contest.

That message is diluted, however, by the body-soul dualism that makes possible all the metaphysical travel the plot requires. It is impossible to avoid the sense that a disembodied soul is who Joe—who any of us—really is. His body is just a meat sack

that could be inhabited by any ready soul. If we are ultimately disembodied souls, then it is hard to take seriously how selves are made in embodied life—through experiences and community, relationships and feelings—much less to embrace as a gift the accidental, sometimes difficult or unfair, parts of embodied life.

The movie could have made this point more strongly if it had just stayed in Queens. Jazz itself and the Black community that nurtures Joe could provide rich fields to explore how to balance fatalism with freedom and self-expression. The people in Joe's life could have offered real insight into the question of how to embrace the contingencies, joys, and complexities of embodied life. Instead the movie spends more than half its time in an imagined metaphysical realm that has no recognizable anchor in any theology or mythology and treats Joe's life as a sketch for philosophical reflection instead of something particular and exquisite to be enjoyed. This is a shame, because we do feel the beauty of Joe's embodied life in the loving way it is drawn: the stoops on his neighborhood block, the worn-out fabric of his couch, the way the sun hits the train on his evening commute. If we could have stayed there with him, we might have experienced something transcendent.

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